



**Pt. Defiance Rail Bypass project
Notes from Lakewood City Council meeting
November 9, 2009**

Kevin Jeffers – Rail Engineering Manager

1. How many minutes of traffic delay will this project cause to the Lakewood/Tillicum communities?

It takes about 45 seconds for a passenger train to pass an intersection traveling at 79 mph. This is the total time starting from when the flashing lights and gates deploy until the train has passed and the gates go up.

We studied all the intersections near the rail line. The amount of traffic delay will vary at each intersection because the vehicle traffic volumes and traffic flows are different. During the afternoon peak hour, two passenger trains - one in each direction - will pass through the Lakewood area. As an example, the intersection of Berkeley and Union in Tillicum will see about 1,300 vehicles in all directions during that afternoon peak hour, which is its busiest time. Today, the average delay experienced at this intersection is 71 seconds per vehicle during the afternoon peak hour. Our studies show that once passenger trains start operating on the line, the average delay is expected to be about 73 seconds per vehicle – a 2.8% increase.

2. What will be the economic impact to the businesses in the Lakewood/Tillicum area?

Short of the minimal disruptions during construction, there would be no other impacts. The project was designed to minimize the need to purchase land, or to revoke leases that many of the businesses along Pacific Highway and Union Avenue have with Sound Transit.

3. It seems that WSDOT decided arbitrarily to do this project without input from the community.

WSDOT first studied this project along with several options back in 1995 and listed it as a proposed project in comprehensive long-range and mid-range plans since then. In 2003, the legislature directed WSDOT to begin the environmental process and in 2005 allocated additional funds to design and build the project. The environmental process was completed under the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA). This process requires a federal agency as the project lead, in this instance it is the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). The environmental work was approved in May 2007.

4. Why are you doing this project if it is just to save six minutes on the Amtrak Cascades route?



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This project is not about reducing the travel time by six minutes. The project focus is about growing the service, making it more reliable, and reducing congestion on the main line. Amtrak *Cascades* service cannot grow on the water-level route around Pt. Defiance. Adding tracks in the water would be a "deal-breaker" environmentally and the hills along the route are prone to mud slides every winter. The series of single-track tunnels under Ruston is a serious bottleneck. If we try to build larger or parallel tunnels to add tracks, a number of homes would be eliminated. The water-level route is already congested; there were 820 trains delayed more than 5 minutes on that segment in 2008.

5. **Did WSDOT inquire/poll the community and current train riders to see if they would prefer the view along Pt. Defiance or to save six minutes on the route?**

No, we didn't. The project focus is to allow more Amtrak *Cascades* trains, improve reliability, and thus offer more travel options to the public.

6. **What is the average percent of occupancy on the trains today?**

The most recent data lists that the average was 64% between July 2007 and June 2008 for the four round trips between Seattle and Portland. Since that time, one of those round trips now connects to Vancouver, BC, so that percentage will likely increase.

This was followed up with the question of:

7. **Why would we add more trains if we have empty seats now?** The standard for transportation facilities is to build for peak need, rather than average need. As discussed in much more depth in the [WSDOT's Amtrak Cascades Mid-Range plan](#) Page 3-8, "Meeting demand during PEAK {emphasis added} trips is imperative, given the potential lost revenue of high paying customers and resulting dissatisfied customers."

8. **What happens if a train derails or stops and blocks the grade crossings in Tillicum?**

The chances of a passenger train stopping and blocking grade crossings in Tillicum is very slim. Most delays/stoppages to passenger trains occur when freight trains are delayed on the rail line. Since there will be very little freight traffic on this line, this is a very remote possibility.

The passenger trains that will move through Tillicum are no more than 1,000 feet long and the Amtrak *Cascades* trains are only 670 feet long. Thorne and Berkeley are over nine-tenths of a mile apart which is over 4,800 feet. Freight trains on the line are usually less than 4,000 feet long so they would not likely block both crossings at the same time. Once the new tracks are built with welded rail, today's freight trains will be less likely to derail and block any crossing.

9. **Why haven't we heard anything about this project until now?**



Washington State Department of Transportation

There has been a significant amount of community outreach on this project since 2006:

- Two public open houses were held in November 2006 and June 2008. Each open house was advertised through public notices published in The News Tribune, the Home Town Clipper, Tacoma Weekly, Tacoma Daily Index, and the Tacoma City Paper in addition to DuPont and Lakewood city newsletters. A third public open house is planned for spring 2010.
 - Numerous articles about the project have been published in the News Tribune.
 - A direct mailing regarding project information was sent to all property owners adjacent to the project corridor in November 2007.
 - Administrators with the cities of Lakewood and Tacoma, Pierce County, Cover Park School District, Camp Murray, and Ft. Lewis were notified by letter and then WSDOT had follow-up meetings with each.
 - A presentation on the project was given to Lakewood City Council in October 2006.
 - A presentation on the project was given to the Tacoma Planning Commission in October 2006.
 - WSDOT project staff attended and presented at Tillicum and South Tacoma Neighborhood Association meetings in October 2008 and July 2008 respectively.
 - WSDOT hosted an information table at two Sound Transit Open houses in November 2007 and June 2009.
- NOTE: There seems to be an assumption that freight traffic is going to grow on the line because of these improvements. This is not entirely accurate. Tacoma Rail currently runs freight trains 2-3 days per week and is considering increasing that to a maximum of six days per week. BNSF currently runs freight from Mobase to Roy twice a week. The long freight trains to Mobase will occur whenever there is a military shipment, either during deployments, returns from deployments, or for exercises in Yakima and other places in the U.S. This activity will continue whether the project happens or not.

The only change for freight trains resulting from this project is that they will be less likely to derail because the track will be significantly improved.

- Concerns have been expressed that freight trains are going to be re-routed from the water-level route onto this route. That is extremely unlikely due to the operational and financial burden imposed by moving freight up a 2% grade, instead of using the level water route. With the State's investments in the corridor, WSDOT would likely contest any action to increase freight on this route to ensure Amtrak *Cascades* schedule reliability.



You can keep in touch with the developments on this project through the [project page](#). If you have any comments or questions, please [e-mail](#) us.